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RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 7600
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 3103
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 0810
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ SEP 4535
RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO PRIORITY 9314
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 1476
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO PRIORITY 1508
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L LIMA 003269

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/27/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PE](#)
SUBJECT: HUGO CHAVEZ, OLLANTA HUMALA AND THE TUNA CAN
CONTROVERSY

REF: LIMA 02957

Classified By: Political Counselor Alexis Ludwig for reasons 1.4(d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Following press reports that tuna cans labeled with pictures of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and nationalist leader (PNP) Ollanta Humala were being distributed in towns devastated by the August 15 earthquake, the public response was severe: Chavez and Humala were seeking to profit from tragedy (Ref). The cans then vanished from public view, and speculation grew that they must have been media fabrications or that Humala's supporters had scrambled to destroy the evidence. Recently, however, a close contact in Congress gave two sample cans to poloff and claimed they were a hoax instigated by Ollanta's jailed brother Antauro Humala designed to smear Ollanta's name. Whatever the case, the tuna can controversy highlights continuing intrigue amid Peru's political opposition. End Summary.

ALBA-core Tuna

¶2. (SBU) A week after the August 15 earthquake in southern Peru, the conservative tabloid El Expreso reported that Ollanta Humala supporters in the outskirts of Pisco and Ica had delivered thousands of tuna cans labeled with photos of Humala and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. A media firestorm ensued, criticizing the cans as a gross attempt to profit politically from a humanitarian tragedy. After the El Expreso report, photos of the cans appeared in a handful of media reports, but otherwise they vanished.

¶3. (SBU) The vanishing cans led to speculation that they never actually existed, except perhaps in doctored photos, or that Humala's Nationalist Party supporters had quickly destroyed all evidence. El Expreso later reported that tuna cans with the labels removed had appeared near Pisco as Humalistas scrambled to contain the public relations damage. Some GOP contacts reported hearing that Humala supporters had shred all leftover labels. Both Humala and Chavez government officials sought to distance themselves from the scandal with denials and counter-accusations that either the US or Peruvian government was involved.

The Cans Re-Discovered

¶4. (C) Recently, however, a close Embassy contact gave Poloff two sample tuna cans, proving, at the very least, that they exist. The can labels, identical to those published in the media, read: "In the Face of Looting, Roadblocks, Desperation, and Chaos; Solidarity with our Compatriots", and combine criticism of the government's response to the earthquake with praise for Humala and Chavez. The Embassy's tuna can source is independent Congressman Gustavo Espinoza, who was elected in 2006 under the PNP banner but then immediately broke his ties with Ollanta. Espinoza, a vocal critic of Ollanta's links to Venezuela, has since become a political operator for Ollanta's jailed brother and political rival Antauro Humala, even sponsoring legislation that sought to grant him amnesty.

An Humala Family Feud?

¶5. (C) Espinoza told us Antauro had produced the tuna cans in an effort to smear Ollanta's name. The two brothers have feuded publicly since Ollanta sought to distance himself from the more radical Antauro during the presidential campaign. In late 2006, Antauro publicly called Ollanta a "damned traitor" ("traidor de mierda"). One Antauro supporter told us that Antauro's 2005 armed rebellion against the central government had helped create Ollanta, "and now we will destroy him." A PNP Congressman publicly echoed the family feud theory, blaming the cans on "a congressman that used to belong to (Ollanta's) party and is now looking to discredit us."

Comment:

¶6. (C) Amidst the volley of accusations and counteraccusations, the discovery of the infamous tuna cans raises as many questions as it appears to answer. While it is possible that the cans reflect an imperfectly considered propaganda campaign on the part of Chavez and his friends in Peru, this would suggest a gang that can't shoot straight. The Antauro Humala "opposition within the opposition" theory, alternatively, would mean that a struggle for the outsider mantle, invaluable in Peru's political arena, is already underway. Whatever the case, the tuna can controversy highlights the intrigue or infighting in Peru's active anti-systemic camp. End Comment.
MCKINLEY